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Department of English | Jamia Millia Islamia



Issue 05

Mapping Fissures:
Reflections on
Culture & Conflict

Non-Fiction | Fiction | Poetry

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Chaos has become the defining characteristic of our time. Arriving at a cohesive conception of the self seems impossible. If the self remains forever elusive, how can we attempt to understand the world around us? How do we decode the signs of our time or translate the myriad concerns competing for our attention?

In our highly polarized world, our generation, with its multiple subjectivities, seems so obscure that it often looks like we communicate in a language of memes and references that collapses on itself. This issue of ELA Magazine has been conceived out of the desire to move beyond these aforementioned assumptions. We have tried to formulate a coherent thought to make sense of our fragmented world.

In our attempt at mapping the fissures in our world, we discovered that to understand our reality, or the lack thereof, we need a paradigm shift. It is often pointed out that modern academia is at a stalemate. Moving beyond these vague declarations, the contributors have undertaken a practical and necessary task, i.e., to highlight the implicit biases in our frameworks. In the first section, the writers focus on the “post” in postcolonial studies and whether it adequately answers the pressing geo-political concerns of our times.

In another section, the contributors have undertaken the task of excavating our social media for signs of contemporary time. Though an ambitious task, in our modest attempt, we uncover the pitfalls of the fetishization of some particular writers like Sylvia Plath and Franz Kafka, among others. We have also attempted a commentary on how social media informs our reading practices. As we move from personal essays into fiction and then poetry, a nexus of culture and conflict has been explored by the writers.

Every other day, we are being ushered into the post of every existing framework. Despite the chaos that surrounds us, we have tried to give voice to our fragmented existence. I see this issue as a dialogue between the students of the English Department of Jamia Millia Islamia as they try to navigate through their disjointed thoughts. The ELA Magazine 2024 is the result of the sheer commitment shown by the Editorial team; even our editing and designing process has been a dialogue as we went back and forth, embodying the spirit of collecting fragments to present you with a whole.

Rutha
Editor-in-Chief

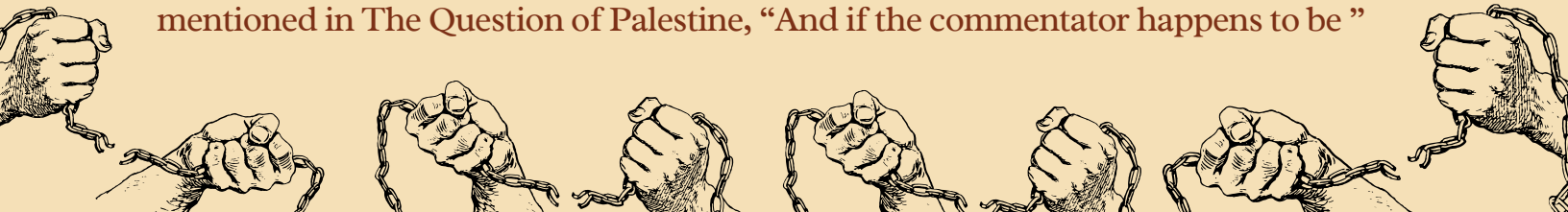


Palestine and the Implicit Bias of Academia

Syed Ilham Jafri

The great Palestinian-American scholar and author Edward Said pointed out a grim mental disposition of the Western society that underpins the history of occupation in Palestine: the denial of the recognition of Palestinians' basic right to exist and their ability to imagine themselves as a people and be recognized as humans. The very attitude of 'otherization' and 'dehumanisation' of Palestinians, a populace of 'Muslim' majority that existed on the land of Palestine for centuries, is deeply rooted in the abhorrence for Muslims, Muslimness, and Islam, or more profoundly, 'Islamophobia'. Said himself writes in his book *The Question of Palestine*, "I refer to the plain and irreducible core of the Palestinian experience for the last hundred years: that on the land called Palestine there existed as a huge majority for hundreds of years a largely pastoral, nevertheless socially, culturally, politically, and economically identifiable people whose language and religion were (for a huge majority) Arabic and Islam, respectively".

The recent ongoing genocide in Gaza has caused the deaths of 33,400 humans, most of them women and children. And no pragmatic action from world countries—all the flag bearers of human rights and academia—substantiates the evolution in the abhorrence of Muslims. This desentization is solely based on Islamophobia, a global phenomenon distinct from the colonial terminologies representing discrimination like racism or anti-Semitism. Salman Sayyid, Professor of Rhetoric and Colonial Thought at the University of Leeds and a pioneer of 'Critical Muslim Studies', writes in his paper titled "A Measure of Islamophobia": "Thus Islamophobia, unlike classical assumptions of discriminatory practices such as anti-Semitism, sexism, homophobia, racism, and so forth, seems to rest upon a subject that is not given by nature. Therefore, being Muslim is considered a matter of choice in a way that being a Jew, a woman, a Roma, or gay is not. The conundrum of Islamophobia is that despite its expressions, which echo those found in anti-Semitism and racism in general, there is a degree of uncertainty about the construction of the subject of Islamophobia. If Muslims are not a race or even a lineage (which they clearly are not), then what are they? Is not being a Muslim similar to being a communist or liberal, that is, a matter of belief rather than fate? He adds, "More than an expression of hatred or fear, Islamophobia needs to be understood as an undermining of the ability of Muslims as Muslims, to project themselves into the future." Said too has mentioned in *The Question of Palestine*, "And if the commentator happens to be "

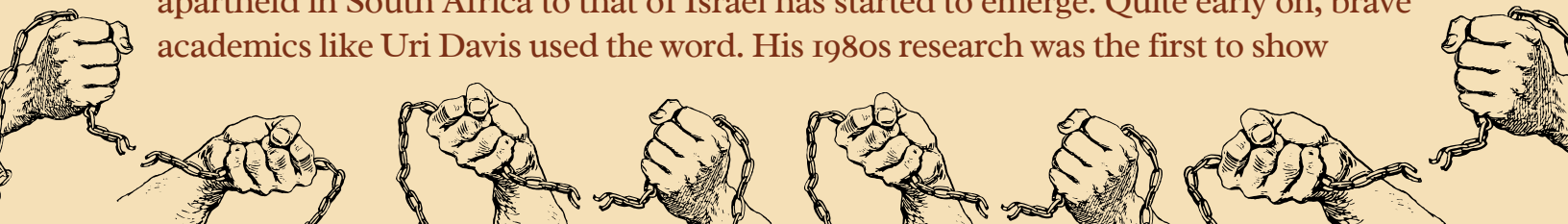


more sophisticated, he may also allude to the "fact" that the Palestinians are part of what is doubtless a fearsome event, the resurgence of Islam.

Similar to what Aristotle refers to as “phronesis”, core objectives revolving around the connotation of ‘academia’ include promoting critical inquiries into the world of intellect and thought and conjoining the reflections with practical order for the amelioration of humanity. However, the passive acceptance of the brutal massacre of thousands of Palestinians by academia, evident in the denial to writers from writing, activists from speaking, and by taking ‘neutral’ positions when one side is the occupier and the other is ethnically cleansed, puts this conception under serious questioning. Universities, academicians, and professors have accepted complying with the order to not disrupt their grants, even at the cost of genocide. Jairo I. Fúnez-Flores, faculty at Texas Tech University, was suspended for her pro-Palestinian stance: “Academia loves to decolonize everything besides occupied land. Its silence on Palestine is enough to know how decolonization has become a metaphor signifying everything besides material change and collective resistance.” The conversation on resistance and resistance movements has systematically been forged as small talk, and above this, defiance towards it is cherished. Precious few like Said, Ilan Pappé, Fanon, Chomsky, and Arundhati Roy are held in high esteem, but their propositions for a solution in Palestine are disregarded.

Prominent American theorist Judith Butler recently put forward her stance: “I think it is more honest and historically correct to say that the uprising of October 7 was an act of armed resistance. It is not a terrorist attack and it is not an anti-Semitic attack”. She explained, “The violence done to Palestinians has been happening for decades. This was an uprising, that comes out from a state of subjugation and against a violent state apparatus. Let us be clear”. The selective framework that accepts and rejects scholars based on who the subject is, and here, Muslims, explicitly explains how Islamophobia has been underpinned in the collective consciousness of individuals, whether they relate to academia, activism, or media. CNN, the biggest American news agency, hence, had no scruples in running fake news on the killing of 40 babies for weeks until dissected by others, thus inflicting the ignorance that it already knew would be accepted by the masses.

However, when compared to the past, voices have been raised significantly, as visible in the ground protests worldwide and the myriad students and activists standing up for the cause in the public interactions of various government officials, including the President of the USA and several state secretaries. The scholarly literature comparing apartheid in South Africa to that of Israel has started to emerge. Quite early on, brave academics like Uri Davis used the word. His 1980s research was the first to show



Israel's regime inside the Green Line as another kind of apartheid. South Africa's anti-apartheid battle has continued since it proposed preventing a ceasefire in Gaza and punishing Israel at the ICJ. Abundant extension in the 'BDS' movement and the approval of the resolution for a ceasefire in the UN Security Council by all the member countries except the USA stress the global concern expressed on the matter. But questions on pragmatic barring violence and terror on Palestinians till today still exhibit the nature of solutions inherent in the nexus of the imperialist West, the 'real' issue that stays untouched in academia. Contrasting the activism and academic engagement for Palestine with that in the course of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the popular "Black Lives Matter" movement yet again adds to the colonial realization of dynamics of power, oppression, and resistance, categorized on grounds of Muslimness or not. This is what Arundhati Roy means when she says, "Our country has lost its moral compass", while referring to the Indian contribution, in her acceptance speech at the P. Govinda Pillai award function held in Thiruvananthapuram on December 13 because "the most heinous crimes, the most horrible declarations calling for genocide and ethnic cleansing are greeted with applause and political reward."

The dissolution of the hierarchy that allows Islamophobia to exist could only bring an end to it. The assemblages that enable Islamophobia must be dismantled in order to combat it, which is what the entire notion of resistance revolves around. To break the cycle of dominance is to support and empower individuals who are its targets. Countermeasures must portray distinct tales, worn in a complete new 'dictionary', as indicated by Ilan Pappé, in both words and acts, going beyond merely disputing the arguments put forth by Islamophobes, like at least working on original epistemology on the subject. After Israel's initial invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Edward Said, in an article titled "Permission to Narrate", urged the Palestinians to expand their struggle into the domain of representation and historical versions or narratives. He argued that the real distribution of political, economic, and military power did not imply that the weaker groups could not fight for the creation of knowledge. This is the most crucial need at the moment—from academia, scholars, thinkers, and intellectuals—who yet find themselves on an academic pursuit to contribute for the better of humanity and are not affected by what Gramsci calls the 'superstructure'. But, as in S. Sayyid's words, "These alternative stories need to abandon a Westernizing horizon as a common destiny."



Foregrounding the Political: Recent Developments in the Postcolonial Discourse

Pranavi Sharma

‘Decolonization is not a metaphor,’ reminds Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang as they challenge the metaphorical use of "decolonization" in academic discourses in an essay by the same name. By reducing decolonization to a metaphor, it becomes detached from the lived experiences of indigenous peoples and fails to address the ongoing violence and dispossession they face. It often serves as a buzzword devoid of any substantive meaning or political commitment. Tuck and Yang highlight the danger of equating decolonization with concepts like diversity, inclusion, or multiculturalism. These frameworks maintain colonial power structures by focusing on representation rather than the redistribution of resources and power. In doing so, they perpetuate colonial logic and prevent meaningful change. There is a need, therefore, to recognize the inherent ambiguities in the current postcolonial discourse of the Israel-Palestine issue post-October 7.

There has been a certain tendency to adopt a “settler moves to innocence” narrative, where settlers seek to absolve themselves of responsibility for colonisation by engaging in superficial gestures of solidarity. It's crucial to recognize that different political factions often appropriate postcolonial narratives and arguments for their own agendas. To ensure the global relevance of postcolonial arguments, it becomes paramount to centre the lived experiences of those who endured colonisation. That true decolonization requires settlers to acknowledge their complicity in colonial violence and actively work towards dismantling colonial systems needs to be addressed.

Jewish settlement, driven by the Zionist movement to establish a national home, began in the late 1800s, influenced by European colonialism. Following the British Empire's withdrawal from Mandate Palestine in 1948, power was not transferred to a newly independent nation-state. The Israeli state emerged in 1947 with the UN Partition Plan and expanded through the 1948 War, leading to the expulsion of around 750,000 Palestinians, known as the Nakba. Further expansion occurred in the 1967 war, solidifying Israeli control over the entire Mandatory Palestine and initiating settlement projects in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The discussion surrounding Zionism and settler colonialism brings out aspects of



Zionism that make it similar to the settler-colonial framework. These include the demographic displacement of the indigenous population, demonstrated through ethnic cleansing during the 1948 war and subsequent restrictions on Palestinian entry into Israel and the West Bank. The control of space is evident in the expropriation of Palestinian land and its transfer to Jewish ownership, leading to significant disparities in land ownership. Cultural erasure is systematically pursued, targeting Palestinian identity, history, and cultural expressions. Political dominance is practised over Palestinians in all areas, whether as citizens within Israel, under military occupation in the West Bank, or besieged in Gaza.

However, critics have argued that solely analysing Zionism through a settler-colonial lens may overlook other significant aspects. Zionism is also a national movement with strong religious ties, reviving language and establishing a cohesive society focusing on a specific land. Despite presenting itself as a liberation movement, it cannot be categorised as such in the traditional sense, as it sought to establish statehood through colonial strategies. The intertwining of settler colonialism and nationalism has profound implications for reconciliation.

Zionism embodies an ideology of exclusive nationalism, pursuing separateness and exclusivity, which inherently views the presence of indigenous peoples as an obstacle. This pursuit has led to the expulsion of natives as part of the settler-colonial project. A common trait among emerging national cultures since the 19th century has been the marginalisation of certain social and cultural segments of the population. National identity often intertwines with minority separatism, reflecting the complexities of modernization. Therefore, understanding the interplay between settler colonialism and nationalism is crucial in analysing the complexities of Zionism and its impact on the region.

Arthur Koestler exclaims that at the birth of the state of Israel, “One nation solemnly promised to a second nation the country of the third.” The conflict resolution becomes even more complicated given the histories of migration and the very idea of an origin. Mahmood Mamdani, in his book *Define and Rule*, points to the fact that a settler “by obscuring an entire history of migrations, portrayed the natives as a product of geography rather than history.”

The local Palestinian population views Zionism as an expansionist settler-colonial movement aimed at displacing them from their land. The Palestinian movement frames itself as an anti-colonial nationalist movement, symbolising resistance to the Third World's decolonization struggle. Palestinian discourse on decolonization dates back to 1917, gaining prominence after 1948. Decolonization in this context involves liberating pre-1948 Palestine from Zionist occupation.



The Palestinian national movement underwent a significant shift in the 1970s, transitioning from an anti-colonial liberation discourse to a focus on establishing a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This shift towards a statist approach, culminating in the Oslo Accords of 1993, marked the embracing of a two-state solution as the pathway to decolonization. While the two-state solution gained traction internationally, many argue that it maintains colonial structures of domination and dispossession, particularly evident in ongoing Israeli settlement expansion and the blockade of the Gaza Strip. Despite its hegemony in mainstream politics, the two-state paradigm has failed to deliver Palestinian self-determination, leading to growing disillusionment.

It would be interesting to draw parallels between Israel and apartheid South Africa, emphasising the need to view all segments of the Palestinian population, including citizens of Israel, Jerusalemites, refugees, and the diaspora, as integral to the national liberation struggle. These critiques underscore the limitations of the two-state solution and advocate for alternative approaches rooted in decolonization and addressing core-periphery relations of exploitation.

Settler colonial decolonization is wrought with various challenges, and it is difficult to achieve a complete break from colonial legacies. There is a need for urgent action, but settler-native power imbalances will hinder progress. Even efforts towards reconciliation face resistance, as genuine decolonization demands significant legal and institutional changes. While imagining a fully decolonized society is complex, the focus should be on establishing political frameworks that acknowledge past injustices while paving the way for equal participation and narrative rights for both natives and settlers. This could involve legally recognising indigenous self-determination or transcending settler-native distinctions altogether, as Mamdani would suggest. Success depends on the strength of indigenous populations and settler power dynamics.



Restructuring National Boundaries and Spatial Identities

Sahil Alom Barbhuiya

My mother, while introducing me to her relatives, says, “*Bidesh thake*,” that is, “my son lives abroad.” I’ve grown tired of explaining to her that, Ma, Delhi is not a foreign land, but it’s India, very much like how Silchar and Guwahati are. She doesn’t relent, and I have lately given up on my venture to correct her, but do I need correction here? I meditated. My mother, a woman of forty-five who hardly ever crossed the narrow chicken-neck corner, let alone venture anywhere outside the state, can barely form any common ground of identity with a city two thousand three hundred kilometres afar. How can she call it her *desh*, roughly translated as ‘home’ in vernacular Bangla and not ‘nation’ as it is popularly conceived, when the only relation that she possibly has with the enigmatic metropolis is the knowledge that the city has her son?

The ubiquitous idea of a nation-state dates back to as late as October 1648, when the peace treaty of Westphalia ended the calamitous thirty years’ war and also established for the first time the nation-state’s autonomy from religious authority, giving impetus to the new arcane concepts of state sovereignty, mediation between nations, and diplomacy. One such incident when the West successfully carried its widely pervasive pattern of a ‘national set-up’ to the nether regions of the Southern Hemisphere is the 1884 Berlin Conference, when imperialistic representatives from nearly fourteen odd countries who never happened to have visited its hinterland counselled on splitting the continent of Africa into multiple pieces, disregarding the multiplicity of ethnicity and cultures of that land.

Unlike Africa, post-independent Indian nationalism coincides with Benedict Anderson’s analysis, which showed that a nation does not predate nationalism but rather that nationalism serves as the antecedent to nation formation. Contrary to nationalist claims, Indian national identity does not stem from consanguinity but rather is predicated on war and bloodshed and the resultant human predicament following the harrowing events of independence and partition. The shaky edifice of an Indian identity, notwithstanding religious, cultural, linguistic, and regional differences, lacks an adhesive that binds it together, and yet the relative stability and liberality of the Indian system make it a beacon in the Global South. However, in the wake of several secessionist movements over the years—the Khalistani separatist



movement, the demolition of sacrosanct places, and the prevalent electoral religious sectarianism in Indian politics—the existence of this edifice is precarious and its future uncertain.

The peculiarity of nationalism and national identity in the subcontinent is of much interest in the sense that despite countless cultural, territorial, rhetorical, and religious backgrounds, a kind of cross-cutting oneness has always been at the forefront. Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* captures a meticulous appraisal of this oddity when the narrator, years after his uncle Tridib's death in Khulna (East Pakistan, now Bangladesh), discovers the connection between a riot in Khulna and a religious event in Srinagar. Using his Bartholomew Atlas and a 'rusty old compass', the narrator starts to create circles on the map that help him understand this sub-continental eccentricity. The first circle he draws encompasses nearly all of South and Southeast Asia, as well as significant portions of China, by setting his compass needle on Khulna and placing Srinagar on its circumference. Within the neat ordering of Euclidean space, he quickly discovers that distance is more of a metaphorical than a physical concept, depending as much on how space is imagined as it does on the reality of space.

Amitav Ghosh writes in *The Shadow Lines*: "Chiang Mai in Thailand was much nearer Calcutta than Delhi is; Chengdu in China is nearer than Srinagar is. Yet I had never heard of those places until I drew my circle, and I cannot remember a time when I was so young that I had not heard of Delhi or Srinagar". A closer observation may suggest that what separates those places from Calcutta is not actually their geographical distance or otherwise, but rather their location outside and inside the mental map of the nation-state and the borders that demarcate its space from that of its neighbours. This, unlike the West, is a feature inherent only to the subcontinent, where a public outcry two thousand three hundred kilometres away is sparked by an incident like the theft of the Prophet's hair in Srinagar. The fact that, despite being nearer to Hanoi and Vietnam, the people of Bangladesh care less about the fate of mosques there than a relatively insignificant incident taking place far in India tells a lot about the complex social relations of the subcontinent that transgresses and defies borders.

Since antiquity and the outset of the first civilizations, geography and landscape have influenced where people settle, how they interact, and ultimately how nations emerge. What kept the Indian subcontinent undivided and aloof is plausibly this protected terrain, the unassailable Himalayas in the north, and the mighty seas on the remaining three sides, which proved impregnable for centuries and kept cultures here intact. Invasion and assimilation of foreign cultures and values over centuries have



given the sociocultural milieu its current form and the nation its shape.

Long before the political battle against imperial power, the idea of the nation already started to take form, first spiritually, then culturally, the finest example being the figure of 'Bharat Mata' during the Swadeshi Movement. A nation was imagined, attained, and later divided by several factors. The 1956 States Reorganisation Act and the 1971 Liberation War made it clear that it was not on religious but linguistic lines on which the imagined nation was carved. The implications, however, were sociocultural, while the impetus was entirely political.

The post-colonial modern Indian national reality, which is deeply rooted in its memory of an arduous anticolonial struggle and heavily attributed to that oppressive past, has recently seen a resurgence in a mass national movement akin to that of the early twentieth century, save for the fact that it is not all inclusive as in the case of its former counterpart. Indian nationalism and national identity have always been a burning issue of contention, and yet, till date, the calculated appraisal of patriotism, jingoism, and disillusionment associated with national identity paves the way for a rayless dungeon of disturbance. These multitudinous disturbances are hopefully not an end to the idea celebrated as India.



Bookstagram and its Discontents

Prantik Ali

Fyodor Dostoevsky and Sylvia Plath, the two literary giants hailing from two different centuries, have managed to hold a sustained appeal to a tidal wave of bookish content on social media we refer to as 'Bookstagram.' While Bookstagram influencers catalogue and curate books with the intention of functioning as springboards for the launch of lesser-known literary works into public discourse, readers and writers alike have drawn attention to the fact that it promotes a certain form of book hoarding as well as book exhibitionism, with its most characteristic feature being a certain sort of spotlessness and gnawing sense of artificiality. Rather than providing an organic intrigue into the world of literature, bookstagrammers often end up perpetuating an aesthetic of themselves that takes away from the 'literariness' of their endeavour, promoting instead a lifestyle that is encapsulated in the visual appeal of the *act* of reading, complemented by fonts and colours as well as a careful selection of props.

A materialist examination of the aesthetics of Bookstagram leads one to focus particularly on how the book is placed, for example, on a bookshelf or in front of a snow-white wallpaper, often surrounded by teapots and flower vases. The *mise en scène* thus produced immediately invokes a 'physicality' to the act of reading, in the sense that the act itself (of obtaining and reading a book before adding it to an ever-increasing stack of aesthetically piled hardcovers) gains more prominence than 'what' is being read, which is relegated to a secondary concern, according to Nicola Rodger.

Nuzhat Khan, in an article for Outlook India titled "Bookstagram Is Where Reading Goes To Die", observes how Bookstagram thrives on the idea of making reading aesthetic as well as 'exclusive'. The #shelfie trend, in which users post selfies with their bookshelves, stands out as a case in point wherein the critical value of literature loses significance to its visual and aesthetic appeal. She argues that such trends can alienate readers based on affordability, since the book gets reduced to nothing more than a commodity to be exploited in the service of community engagement. On the other side of this glitzy, aesthetic realm lies another sub-culture that churns out low-resolution literature memes, focusing on writers and philosophers whose works have particular relevance for today's youth. To cite one of Kafka's most famous works, *Metamorphosis*, the protagonist, Gregor Samsa, wakes up one fine morning to find himself turned into a gigantic insect. As the story progresses, Gregor finds himself horribly at odds with his family members, mainly because he can no longer support his family financially. He also resents his job and paints his employer as a man with oppressive traits. Alienated from the company of man, he succumbs to a profoundly

paralysing depression, symbolised in the short novel through his literal metamorphosis into a gigantic and repulsive insect.

This belittling sense of mental paralysis seems to derive mainly from the capitalistic machinery that is unceasingly at work in the heart of modern society, with its variegated webs of control and oppression, both implicit and explicit. For Kafka, family and work are similar trappings that function at the behest of capitalist interests to drive the modern individual to loathe their daily existence. This same strain of critique, in the age of Bookstagram, directed towards the invisible forces of capitalistic control over the subject's life, seems to find voice through a barrage of memes that refer, often fleetingly and mostly mischievously, to literary figures and their philosophies.

A simple text-over-image showing an insect on its back, staring at the ceiling of what appears to be a snug bedroom, is used to refer to the paralysing effects of modern-day capitalism, plummeting the subject into the darkest recesses of alienation and mental illnesses. It is not surprising that young people across the world find this category of memes relatable, for they are privy to the real-time consequences of global capitalism in their own private lives, in their own small ways. Crushed under the burdens of a society that is structured to wring the life out of an individual by exploiting their physical and mental well-being, it becomes easy to see oneself in a condition similar to Kafka's repulsive insect, cut off from society, rotting away in one's bedroom under the slow pull of an interminable and inexplicable ennui.

Another aspect of this disproportionate obsession with figures like Kafka, Dostoevsky, and Plath is, of course, grounded in the fallacious assumptions people often adopt about their conception of literary genius and mental illnesses. A significant number of memes revolving around these figures often invoke the fact of Kafka's troubled relationship with his father, for instance. In the same way, Plath's suicide has become a kitschy pop cultural moment in literary history, often the brunt of insensitive jokes that inevitably gravitate towards keywords like 'head', 'oven', and so on. Even the most rudimentary of analyses on the romanticization of mental illness in the paradigm of literature makes it apparent that the youth of today's generation are drawn, irresistibly, to evoke the philosophies of a certain subset of writers whom public imagination has decreed to be 'mentally tormented'.

The cultural semiotics surrounding dead literary geniuses also afford an easy gateway into philosophy, as can be indicated by the pervasiveness of literature and philosophy memes in youth internet cultures. As such, figures like Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, and Kierkegaard become signifiers of highbrow scholarship or intellectualism. Latching on to the ideas and philosophies of these men, in whatever way, affords the youth an

easy way of demonstrating their ability to comprehend the seemingly impregnable and sanctified realm of theory. Philosophy and literature come across as objectified markers of academic acumen and cultural refinement, once again colouring the discourse with connotations of class. Sharing a wordy meme about Deleuze becomes a symbolic act of letting one's followers know that the user has not only grasped the concepts popularised by Deleuze but has also mastered the finer nuances of his philosophy to an extent that allows them to take part in the comedic/ironic depiction of his ideas in meme culture.

The demarcation between high and low art becomes an important concern while discussing the explosion of literary and philosophical tropes on social media. An exposition of Dostoevsky's characters or a theme relevant in Virginia Woolf's autobiographical works will gather an audience that either takes a genuine interest in these works or one that simply wants to associate itself with indicators of 'serious' literature. On the other hand, influencers who primarily deal with young adult novels or other contemporary works of literary fiction might earn the ridicule and scorn of the previous category of audience, owing to their proximity to less serious, non-canonical works of literature.

These are some aspects of the virtual space that promote bookishness, be it through highly stylized decor or spontaneously rolled-out memes. It would be a dissatisfying gesture to decry this space as purely antagonistic to the interests of a genuine bookworm if such an expression as 'genuine bookworm' were to make any sense at all in the first place. Rather, any attempts at promoting the practice of reading are to be embraced with open arms in the age of digital technology, wherein reading becomes an arduous act as compared to other forms of media consumption that are popular today. Not to mention, in the space of five years alone, a generation of young people have witnessed a devastating global pandemic and are currently witnessing a genocide being live-streamed on their phones.

At such junctures of history, when all appears full of despair, it becomes important that we let the soft glow of literature persist in our lives in whatever way it wants to, as it increasingly becomes evident that to survive, we must consume literature promiscuously.

The Digital Plane and its Aesthetic Experience

Anveer Nishad Rahman

Is there any correlation between the dark academia, the aesthetic Kafka-quoted Reels we see on Instagram, and the works of abstract neo-expressionist painters such as Jean Michel Basquiat?

Instagram Reels have a huge impact on how we consume art and literature nowadays. It is fair to state that it is the key way we engage with art and literature of any century, empowering us with a glimpse of Monet's *Impression, Sunrise* as a background, and an excerpt from Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*. This culmination of different art forms in Instagram Reels opens, for a brief ninety seconds, a window into a dream-like experience that is highly relatable and impactful. It creates a small moment of euphoria before we move to the subsequent reel and onto the next unrelated one, into an abyss of different colours, texts, and experiences as we sit unthinkingly without any intent or purpose, only looking for content that we quickly forget.

With the introduction of Instagram Reels, the accessibility of art and literature has increased in scope. As Berger mentions in this seminal work, *Ways of Seeing*, our understanding of the world first comes from perceiving it and later naming things. And the way people remake their perception of the world is by making images of it. Thus, representation of the creator's way of seeing the world becomes a way in which we understand reality and experience emotions.

Art becomes a medium, a mirror that lets us know our passions. Instagram Reels, especially those targeting the intellectual class, frequently showcase a series of quotes from novelists, philosophers, and poets. They often use paintings from various genres as a background, accompanied by music, to create an immersive textual experience. The experience of these Reels feels almost phantasmagorical with their fast pace and iconographic style, which tends to represent the reality or worldview of the creator using art and literature in a reductive way to produce a specific form of emotion.

It appears that there is a faint correlation between the portrayal of "aesthetic" quotes and paintings in Instagram Reels and the historical development of modern art as we moved from art forms such as realism and baroque towards impressionism, expressionism, and abstract art. To a painting enthusiast, Reels almost look like an out-of-wedlock begotten child of neo-expressionists and graffiti artists such as Basquiat. The latter uses symbols and texts to create a fragmentary yet lived experience. His use of form is an extension of the philosophy of art critics such as the

Bloomsbury Group's Roger Fry, who considers not only the content of the work but also the significance of form in conveying feeling. The mode Reels use is intricate and iconic, evoking a multitude of senses to become something palpable and conforming, its importance similar to the picture plane envisioned by painters.

The picture plane, which Philip Guston, the Canadian American painter, calls the key and a first principle, becomes an important tool in which they present their paintings. This plane, which Tate UK's website explains simply as "the picture plane, can be thought of as the glass of the notional window through which the viewer looks into the representation of reality that lies beyond." It is the canvas yet a metaphysical plane through which the viewer looks at the painting, in which all paintings seem to exist. Reels seem to exist in a similar dimension, which I call the 'Digital Plane'. Just as the photograph or painting resides on the picture plane, the digital plane is the canvas on which the Reels are made, having their own set physical dimension or form, which is responsible for it becoming a genre of its own. The Reels' existence on the plane is significant due to the specific configuration of the digital plane. It is this specificity that pushes Reels to be unique, materializing them into highly addictive and relatable content.

In order for the reel to evoke certain emotions, it creates depth using loosely interconnected music and text. The juxtaposition of texts, paintings, and music from various cultures, such as Arab, German, Indian, English, etcetera, helps assimilate the reel into the Instagram algorithm in such a way that irrespective of the origin of the reel, people from diverse backgrounds can find them engaging. And the text often taps into common yearnings and struggles such as unrequited love, existentialism, and hope.

With the advent of Instagram Reels, we see a shift in the way cultures now consume art in day-to-day life. People who lack the privilege to visit places like the Museum of Modern Art in New York or simply do not have enough time to read poetry in between their daily nine-to-five jobs are now able to enjoy art and literature, probably providing some sustenance to the humdrum beat of everyday life. If one tries to be an optimist, one can also hope that easy access to copious amounts of excerpts and quotes from authors and the privilege to look at the art in a digitised form persuade a common man to pick up the brush or the pen to create something.

However, the Reels made on this 'digital plane' often fail to explore the contexts and intentions behind the written words or the historical and biographical epochs they belong to. But before we look for the chink in the armour of the said digital plane, we must acknowledge that we cannot underscore the ability of art and literature to move and impact our lives. It's influence on cultures of the past, present, and future is

always indelible, and the emergence of the digital plane only seems to contribute towards the influence and consumption of art in today's society. The 'digital plane' makes art and literature accessible to people from various classes, consequently influencing them. Additionally, Berger highlights in *Ways of Seeing* that art has always been mystified by the wealthy elite. Berger defines mystification as "the process of explaining away what might otherwise be evident" in order to "gatekeep," which prevents lower classes of people from accessing art. The digital plane is able to demystify it and bring classical literature and highbrow art to the masses.

Once we acknowledge the digital plane, we can decode how these aesthetic Reels garner viewership. Authors such as Hemingway, Mary Oliver, Jaun Elia, Camus, and Orwell, who might have been considered anachronistic, have ironically become public favourites because of their concise and emotive prose. Their ability to be esoteric yet universal seems to have given rise to a newfound fame in their deaths. Kafka, who went unnoticed his entire life, would have become feverish if he'd known the appeal he would create in posterity. Also, once we look perceptibly at the state of everyday life globally, the rise of the fame of artists like Goya or Kafka seems obvious in many ways, as they are the ones who have been able to reflect the tribulations in the hearts of today's masses. Instagram has spearheaded new movements for celebration for these authors and artists, who have penetrated the psyche of modern existence, giving rise to their consumption. Hence, the 'digital plane' has capitalised on its ability to reach millions of people, and as we influence the algorithm, the algorithm influences us.

Performative Reading in the age of Social Media

Mukaram Shakeel

When I was younger, in school, I would always be excited about the “library class,” a class in our timetable designated for the weekly visit to the library. I’d leisurely, taking my time to read all the titles in all the sections, select my book for the week. Then, we would wait in a long line to get the book officially issued. I would rush out with palpable excitement and tuck the book safely in my bag. As I would reach home, after freshening up, I’d take out the book, run to our guest room, lock it (since I didn’t have a room back then and because we were scolded for reading ‘novels’), snuggle up in a blanket, and immerse myself in the world of that book. This routine would continue—each week I’d pick books and read them in either the comfort of my home or in classes I had no interest in. It was a safe space for me. Once, I had forgotten that I was in a class and was nudged back to reality by a friend sitting beside me, only to find out that the teacher was in front of me, and a scolding ensued. I loved escaping into a different world each week, and I would have to be scolded or nudged to be brought back into the real one.

Fast forward to now, and I struggle to even read one paragraph with any patience without itching to move on to the next thing. I have to sit down and force myself even to read a decent-length article. Of course, it’s not just reading; it’s the same with watching videos, films, or even writing. Anything that goes over the standard length of the short video format that has taken over social media in the form of Instagram Reels or YouTube Shorts feels like a task that I have to force myself to get through. It’s the lament of the entire generation. In her book *Attention Span: A Groundbreaking Way to Restore Balance, Happiness and Productivity*, Dr. Gloria Mark explains that there’s been a noticeable reduction in attention span. Her research shows our attention spans have been reduced to an average of 47 seconds. Another study showed that half of TikTok users found videos longer than one minute stressful. “Skimming” is the word most frequently used to describe how people now go through any given piece of writing. This restlessness, accompanied by the constant pressure that comes with pursuing a literature degree—to consume more, to read more, and to be more—makes it much harder to interact with a given piece of literature without worrying about moving on to the next.

The on-and-off COVID lockdowns and the inescapable dependency on our cell

phones and the internet have changed the way we interact, not only with people but also with the texts and media that we consume. We also exist in dual worlds, and there's a dissonance that comes with the virtual personalities we now have to build and work hard to keep for the audience we've gained through social media. Social media has turned every aspect of our lives into content to be consumed, and there is a never-ending worry about the content we put out. Our identities and our interests have become marketable, and rather than building a strong sense of self, people create illusions of a type of personality. Our self-esteem is tied to how people perceive us online and, as a direct consequence, offline as well.

Anxiety and depression, too, are on the rise because of social media. They have become marketable because they create a sense of belonging for troubled youth. Buzzwords are used to self-diagnose, and mental illness has been turned into an aesthetic. Sadness and loneliness are captured in tinted tones that play out like a film, and pain becomes a performance. Every bad event is a trauma, and every quirk is a symptom of one or another mental health disorder. Influencers on social media, like everything else, have also romanticized mental illness. So much so that I've found young adults and some friends attempt to build their entire personalities around literature that has been made an aesthetic on social media, such as the poetry of Charles Bukowski and Sylvia Plath, to name a few. There's nothing wrong with consuming a certain type of art, but to build one's entire personality around the characters of these books or the doomed lives of their authors drastically limits the scope of reading. Not only do other people follow suit in romanticizing mental illnesses, but they also only read to fit into a niche.

There is also the case of Pinterest boards classifying literature into 'mid', 'superior', and 'god tiers', or generally bashing people online for being “uncultured” for reading books that are not deemed worthy of reading by the “cultured” people. The virtual academic intelligentsia decrees what literature is consumable and what is trash. You can't read what you want anymore because you're more worried about what you should be reading. What was a very personal activity that brought happiness and fulfillment has now become a shallow competition of who reads how much and, most importantly, what.

No doubt, the Instagram reading community has brought a lot of people together, and what we read is important to our cognitive development, but somehow we're even less in touch with what we actually want to be reading. Our tastes, something that makes us “superior” or “different” from others, are pre-decided and delivered to us through social media, and we think twice before letting a person know of our opinion. Everybody has a definition of what they consider to be good and bad literature owing

to their unique personal experiences.

It is important to read both sides of the spectrum and in between, decide what you like, and naturally let your opinions build around that. Reading in isolation branches out into different thoughts, and you come to your own understanding of that text over any given period of time. Now, we look up the reviews and what others are saying, and then decide to give that book the time of our day. We enter into it expecting what we've already read about it, and it gets harder to form an original opinion. It robs us of critical thinking and the ability to form our own nuanced opinions because we've grown used to finding other people's opinions and adopting them as our own.

Reading, for me and, I believe, many in my generation, is not just a leisure activity anymore. It comes with added pressure now. Reading, like everything else, has become tied to your self-image, and if you're not doing it a certain way, you're doing it wrong. You're subject to judgment and, more damagingly, self-critique of not reading more, not reading right, or not reading better. It makes me wonder, apart from other things, where this restless, constantly online generation is headed. And where are we—increasingly dissociated from our peers, constantly battling to arrive at a consistent idea of self—heading in this journey as readers, and what would “reading” mean for us in the future?

Beyond the River Padma

Shreyashi Das

“I told them I am a foreigner. I am from Bangladesh,” Maa recounted.

As a girl of eight, I had very little idea about nations, nationalities, and boundaries. Even my mother tongue, Bengali, was not wholly formed. Studying in a Catholic school, I had only just started getting acquainted with the language. The idea of having any ties with Bangladesh, a land that, as Maa claimed, fought vehemently to assert Bengali as its language, seemed scary. “I too am a foreigner, Maa, England is my country,” I had cried out in protest. I remember Maa bringing me a miniature of the globe and pointing her finger at a triangular-looking area. “Now, that’s India. This is our country”. “But you said you are from Bangladesh”, I said, attempting to refute her teachings. “Oli”, Maa replied, “you will understand one day.”

In my eighth grade, history was among my least favourite subjects. I was almost about to doze off when I thought I heard “Bangladesh” being mentioned somewhere. I immediately sat up straight and tried to listen to what Chakraborty sir had to say. On the pages of my history book, I remember seeing photographs of men and women trying to get onto trains—pictures of women desperately trying to squeeze into congested train bogies.

That night, I could not sleep. “Maa, are we really Bangladeshi?” I asked her. “Your grandparents came from Bangladesh during the seventies. Your *Dadu* became a refugee. As for my father, he lost all his lands, including our beautiful *Jomidar Bari*,¹ during the riots. However, unlike your *Dadu*, my father, coming from a family of Zamindars, had some houses in Calcutta. Someone—may *Dugga*² bless his soul—saved your *didu*³. She arrived in Kolkata, hidden in a truck.”

I spent the rest of the night looking through our old photo albums, yet I found no sepia-tinted photographs of our ancestral home. All I found were a few half-worn-out Bangladeshi *daak tickets*⁴ sticking out of really old postcards that had some pithy phrases scribbled on them. Most of these were addressed to my maternal grandparents by their Muslim friends in Dhaka. All that I could make out of the faded writings were some exchanged greetings and a few lines regarding their angst about the ongoing war of liberation in Bangladesh. It was because of these friends, as I would find out much later, that my maternal grandparents had managed to escape the riots. They hid my maternal grandparents in their own houses and shops during the riots, even after knowing that if they were discovered hiding a Hindu family, their

¹ a palatial house that belongs to the Zamindars

² colloquial usage of Goddess Durga’s name

³ maternal grandmother

⁴ postal stamps

own lives and families would be at risk.

Yet, what I did not understand back then, but I would understand much later, was the fact that the partition had been kinder to my maternal grandparents. Unlike my other set of grandparents who came to Calcutta as refugees, they had houses in both Bengals, and although they could no longer live as lavishly as they did in Dhaka, they were at least blessed with a roof above their heads and even came from a class that was supported by the Left government, the then ruling party in Bengal. However, my paternal grandparents were not as lucky. Coming to West Bengal as refugees, they had to shift camps and move around different parts of India, temporarily staying in Bhopal and changing camps in Chattisgarh before being able to attain land from the government of West Bengal.

At fourteen, I got to know about my East Pakistani descent. However, I had always been made aware of our differences from the people of West Bengal, or the *Ghottis*, as Maa called them. “The *Hilsa* is our delicacy”, Maa used to tell me every time Baba got *Hilsa* from the bazaar. “The *Ghottis* are not good cooks. They add sugar to everything they cook. I cannot have a Ghotti in my kitchen” became Maa’s staple dialogue every time we needed to search for house help.

The East Bengal-Mohun Bagan match was never a quiet affair in our family. Little did we care for the outcome of the India-Pakistan match like the rest of the citizens. In the initial days after my initiation into the world of television, I remember having screamed with joy when Mohun Bagan scored a goal. However, my excitement soon wore off as I noticed the scowl on Baba’s face. In his red and yellow T-shirt, Baba looked like a formidable fire to my childish gaze.

Maa always wanted to go to Dacca. “No, not Digha again. We went there last year. Oli is an adult now. She must see Bikrampur (present-day Munshiganj in Bangladesh). It’s been so long since I set eyes on our house. Oli, you will feel like a *rajkonya*⁵ if you see the house”. Baba, however, never took us there. “What’s the use of grave-digging? Oli is our future. There’s no need to stir up what’s already lost. She does not even speak Bangal (a dialect of the Bengali language spoken by the *Bangals* or the people of East Bengal),” he would say.

I hated it when Baba spoke in *Bangal* with my grandparents. “Baba, you sound like a villager when you speak like that”. I would rebuke him. “Oli, Baba was a villager. Maa, do you remember how we used to go behind your back and steal unripe mangoes from your trees?” Baba would continue in *Bangal*, paying no heed to my disapproval.

The talk of rivers excited Dadu. After coming to India as a refugee, Dadu lived for some time in the Sundarbans. One day, when we conversed over tea, he told me the

⁵ princess

story of the Marichjhapi massacre and the complacency of the Left government. “We had to shift camps. On some days, we had to manage without two square meals a day. I remember your dida used to make us some rice crispies with mustard oil. That was all that we managed to eat on certain days”.

*Thammi*⁶ would usually keep quiet at such times. Sometimes, when *Dadu* would start speaking, she would put down her cup of tea on the saucer, place it hurriedly on the bamboo stool, and leave the room. “A light heart, your *Thammi*... But what can I say after all that she has endured? She hates it when I speak of Bikrampur and Barishal. Yet, when I close my eyes and try to recall lines from all the poems that I have learned by heart ever since my boyhood days, “Padma Nadir Majhi” (The Boatman of River Padma) is the first poem that comes to my mind. Oh, how Swadesh and I used to sit for hours with our fishing rods and our legs immersed in the waters of the Padma River, and then return home with our big catch and wait for Maa to serve us the Hilsa wrapped in banana leaves”.

Thammi's death changed everything. *Dadu* became quieter. He would spend his days alone in his room, reading poems by Jibanananda Das. On *Thammi*'s death anniversary, we all revisited the Nimtala Ghat in Aheritola to observe the *Pindadaan*.⁷ My *Dadu*, who had shunned words from his life for a year, suddenly rebuked Baba for bringing him to this ghat. “Couldn't you find any better place? Do I have to bid a final farewell to your Maa in this filthy place? Look at the river—all dirty with garbage. Who but paupers come here? Our Padma is so clean that you can see your reflection in the waters. If I could only cross the Ganges and see my land for one last time before death, Your *Maa* never got the chance. *Debu*, take me to my Bikrampur once.”

That year, *Dadu* died of a heart attack. He never got to see Bikrampur, just as *Thammi* never got to see Barishal. Yet, when I think of it now, in retrospect, it was a blessing in disguise. Bikrampur was for *Dadu*—not a place but a metaphor—the metaphor of an ideal place, a place that belonged to his dreams, a place that gave him the strength to face all of life's difficulties; it was his sacred memory. Had *Dadu* seen present-day Bikrampur, his illusions might have broken, for no place remains stagnant outside our memories.

I, the third generation of the Das family, having never seen Bangladesh, had no memory of this place to haunt me. All that I knew of Barishal and Bikrampur was from the stories that I heard from Maa and *Dadu*. The only Bangladesh I knew was a Bangladesh of memory, a montage of the strands of memories that refused to translate into signifieds, remaining as mere signifiers. The violence and the trauma of partition were all parts of a past that was beyond me. Yet, I have been exposed to partitions and borders throughout these twenty-five years, for borders are beyond physical or geographical demarcations. They are our cultural practices, our beliefs, and the memories that are etched in our souls.

⁶ an endearing term for ‘Thakuma’ or the paternal grandmother

⁷ a Hindu death ritual

Migratory Melodies

Sarthak Parashar

When I first moved to Delhi and was in a friend circle that consisted of people from UP, Odisha, and Bihar, words that did not need translation back home were met with curious gazes from my peers. *Gassa* did not inherently mean a morsel anymore. It's not like I did not know what *niwala* meant—I just never had to use it before.

Bharatpur is a mere 180 kilometres south of Delhi, and neither of them is a cultural shock to the other. The culinary flavours of Delhi don't seem too foreign to my palette. The language, too, doesn't seem like a mosquito whining near my ear. I don't feel the need to hush it away with the movement of my hand. Yet, it's not the same.

Being in Delhi evokes in me the constant feeling that I don't know my roots, at least not as much as I should. When I say roots, I mean my culture and language. I feel there isn't enough representation of the place I come from, neither in literature nor in cinema. And I am afraid that if I wait too long to try to build that, I will no longer have people to go to and ask about the difference between *Barhvi* and *Terhvi* or what a *norha* is. I wouldn't always have my *Badepapa* to tell me that when a man dies, the final day of the mourning period is the 12th day (*Barhvi*), and *Tehrvi* (13th) is reserved for the woman. Or that *nohra* stands for a cow barn.

My family, on both sides, has rural, agrarian origins. All four of my grandparents came from villages to cities and towns to study and then settle with their kids. They bought land at meagre prices and built houses, one room at a time. Their kids spent their summer vacations in their ancestral villages around west Uttar Pradesh and spoke the dialects of Braj Bhasha, sweeter as you go eastwards towards Mathura and harsher as you go northwards towards Haryana.

As kids, our parents and grandparents spoke a mix of Hindi and Braj Bhasha amongst themselves and with us. At school, we were fined for speaking Hindi. Braj Bhasha was a symbol of the uncultured. And I didn't feel the need to reclaim it for most of my late teenage years. I had bigger concerns, like wanting to polish my English. As a result, I lost my grip on Hindi, although I was aware of this fact.

Now, when I speak in English, Bharatpur shows. When I speak in Braj Bhasha, my convent education and six years away from home in bigger cities show. I am not native enough anywhere. And it shows in my Hindi as well—it's harsher than my Dogra flatmate's Hindi. It sounds inherently rude to our landlord and the Kanpuriya broker who helped us find the apartment I am writing from. Devansh, my flatmate, does a better job conversing with people, while my tongue lacks courtesy.

When I tell people that I come from a city in Rajasthan, they assume that I live amidst sand dunes, speak Marwadi, and eat *Dal-baati-choorma* daily. It takes me a moment to help them understand that I come from a district that is characterised by roads that run through mustard fields with tall *Safeda*¹ trees on both sides. And that in the two years that I lived in Jaipur, I could barely understand the Marwadi that the Uber drivers spoke on their personal calls. We greatly enjoy *Dal-baati-choorma* though, but we don't eat it every day. Our *Kadhi* is closer to the Punjabi *Kadhi Pakoda* as compared to the thin, mildly simmered Rajasthani *Kadhi*.

Times are constantly changing, though. Rajputi Poshaks are slowly creeping into the female attires at wedding functions. There is at least one performance of the popular Rajasthani song '*Banni tharo chand sari so mukhdo*' (O bride, your moonlike face)' in every *Sangeet*. Much more West UP in culture and language than stereotypical Rajasthan, my much-endogamous family welcomed a very Marwadi bride from Ajmer two years ago. With herself, she brought 16 more days to our one-day, symbolic celebration of *Gangaaur*.

Last Diwali, I did a story based on a queer couple in my hometown, only to realize that my urban, English-medium education can neither efficiently understand nor translate the ethos and pathos of my hinterland. All of the 10 rupee notes that we were fined for not speaking in English at the school have become a bittersweet memory. A poignant cautionary tale. Something to look back and learn from—to hold onto my roots as tightly as I can and to represent them in all of myself and all that comes out of me.

My homeland, Bharatpur, is known for two things: for housing one of the world's best bird sanctuaries (Keoladeo National Park) and, more notoriously, for its crime rate. Until a couple of decades ago, people would refuse to give rooms to anyone who came from Bharatpur to live in cities like Jaipur and Delhi. With almost no representation in either literature or cinema, such stereotypes are bound to flourish. Of a harmless, white-tourist-attracting bird sanctuary. And of harmful, neo-Wasseypur notoriety.

Hence, it's important that someone writes about the 'makeout spot' that Jawahar Burj is and how it's situated right opposite a police station. Or about the renowned doctor who fakes his own kidnapping every few years to stay in the news. About the *bartan-shop* owner whose sudden riches made people say that he found a treasure underneath his house. Or about the three-legged monkey (called *tonta bandar* by the people) that I wasn't scared of until he attacked me.

And hence, I feel the onus of giving a mainstream voice to my not-so-distinct roots. Bharatpur, for me, is another Ayemenem waiting to be the mystical setting and beating heart of many groundbreaking novels and films. I just hope I am not the only one who thinks that.

¹eucalyptus

Through the Lanes of Chaos

Alisha Uvais


Count on a Muslim neighbourhood to keep you well-fed. It could be five in the morning, and Khalid *bhai* would be up and about, preparing ingredients for *haleem biryani*. After *maghrib* or the evening prayer, teenage boys come out to stroll for leisure, and the middle-aged men have their quintessential *shaam ki chai* before returning home. The women, too, quickly offer their prayers and run to meet their relatives for another round of gossip. The Muslim neighbourhood, with its fondness for conversations, gleams in its amber radiance and gears up for another chaotic day.

As I make my way to *Badi Nani's*, I look at the familiar street as if I were walking it for the first time. Why is it that you catch sight of the things truest about you only when they are imperilled? My mind runs wild with simulations, which once seemed too grotesque to be real. Meanwhile, the familiar street continues to bustle with colour. Young girls, dressed up to the nines, offer a nitid contrast to white skull caps. The azure sky can only be seen through the frills of festivities. I am carrying in my hands bags full of gifts shopped from Batla House, which fascinatingly resembles my neighbourhood back home.

To begin with, the long, twisted curves of the unpaved roads are always congested with bumper-to-bumper traffic. It is more than expected to wade in deep water whenever it rains. Street traders set up shop right ahead of sizable amounts of trash. The unfazed crowd, mostly comprised of burqa-clad women, continues to keep the trade going. Most days, the markets forget to clock out until the early hours of the morning. There is nothing that cannot be found there; my bags carrying footwear, several bottles of itr, tasbeeh counters, and clothing accessories attest to clear evidence.


Close to Batla House perches Shaheen Bagh, popular within our country's left fraternity, and the newly selected alternate to Old Delhi food joints. For the year that I resided there, my longing for morning walks revealed to me that Shaheen Bagh has no *bagh*. The privilege of a park is denied to its residents, and I wonder whether people feel its absence or are so accustomed to it not being there that they don't question it at all. Considering how I have made peace with living in unplanned parts of ghettos on the periphery of cities, I assume it to be the latter.

I offer my *salaam* to *Badi Nani*, who is pleased to meet me, despite being unsure of who I am. Each time, I have to identify myself through my parents before she can




recognize me. Once she gets an idea, she frowns at my appearance. I am still a chubby six-year-old in her imagination. Our conversation repeats itself as a custom, and she asks for my mother's well-being. I tell her Ammi misses her, and she blesses me by putting a hand over my head. She asks me to pray for a peaceful departure in return, to which I react by giving an awkward smile.

As she continues to ponder over the most desirable ways to go, I am reminded of my grandmother and the day she passed away. The funeral announcements from the *masjid* that I dismissed on other days rang a little too long that day. The men went to offer the prayer for the deceased while the women read the Quran at home. It was the first time I remember attending a funeral. *Badi Nani*, clearly, does not want it to be my last.




I hand over the bags to my aunt, who both chides and thanks me for the gesture. With another awkward smile, I pick up my bowl of *dahi phulkis*. When we hear a motorbike pass, she remarks on how the *gali* gets particularly noisy on Eid. I further the chat by mentioning how the little kids add to the noise by moving back and forth between houses for their shares of Eidi.

I thought growing older would mean a loss in my share, but my Eidi has only increased over the years. *Nana* has doubled the amount, and my recently employed siblings rejoice in the act of giving for once. Though I always plan to save Eidi for later, I know it will vanish as soon as I go back to Delhi. I might splurge on a trip to *Jama Masjid*, which I have not visited in a while.



Delhi-o6 is no different. It echoes all over it with the same aura as home, Okhla, or Old Hyderabad. When I visited the Char Minar for the first time, I kept thinking about how the cityscape is uncannily similar to that visible from the *minar* at *Jama Masjid*. The parasols, the yellow lights, and the overarching hubbub that turns silent upstairs. Where recent years have meant an enduring sense of displacement, there is a sense of belongingness in the mismanaged affairs of Muslim localities.

Interestingly, it has also allowed me to welcome the chaos I find myself in, both when I am out and about and when I am in space solely on my own. By the chaos inside, I am referring to my incapacity to make my room look like it belongs on a Pinterest board, the keeping together of things unlike, and in general, the absence of symmetry. By the other chaos, I mean the unorganised division of the city, folks making their way to get on with their lives, and the unending struggle of people who do not possess the privilege of enclosed spaces. I have started to like the haphazardness of it all. Things may seem out of order, but within this chaos, people have created for themselves compact ecosystems to thrive and challenge the elements of ill-will that threaten their existence. To exist, then, is to challenge. And I love existing in orderly chaos.



TOHI

Vinayak Bhardwaj

Submerged bodies turned soft, piously washed, and yet refused on either side by these forgotten lands. The land, finely chiselled, not in fair proportions but in a manner that suited the power, surveilled by men clad in their specific shades of green. These bodies often meander through miles in harmony with the swift currents of Tohi, the river that runs and soothes the torn wound. The wound of forced separation, where women and locks were left behind and men fled to the other side with the keys. The land on both sides forfeits these bodies, whose hands and feet are tied with barbed wires, leaving fresh marks on their bare skin.

But Tohi stands a rebel, carrying away all these wires and disposing them off at these lands again. It finally allows these submerged bodies to move freely, caressing their cold limbs with its soft currents, abiding by no barriers or boundaries. The existence of these forgotten natives is finally acknowledged, not by their fellow beings, but by death. As the sharp steel thorns pierce through the soaked skin, these bodies bound by the wires are torn into multiple shreds. The crimson nectar finally flows and merges with the currents of Tohi, achieving a state of complete harmony.

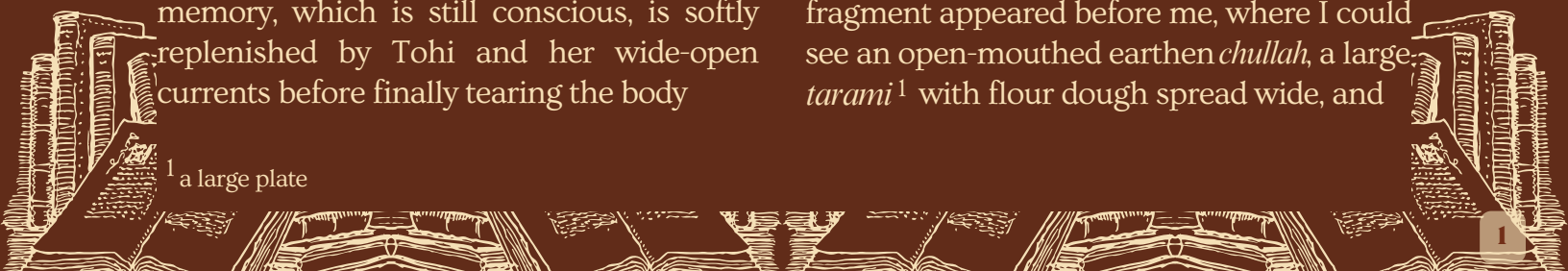
It is here that the inner soul and the outer body unite before gradually becoming figments of human memory. The body is lost, but the soul and the memory remain. A memory, which is still conscious, is softly replenished by Tohi and her wide-open currents before finally tearing the body

apart. Tohi punctures the body to get to the subconscious. It is the thoughts of the subconscious pulled out of these bodies that live as memories after the body perishes. This blend of time exists for a while, where memory overpowers the time, and then it slowly fades away with a promise of return.

I am not a writer but a struggling storyteller, sitting at my desk, a mere worker of conscious present. My daughter stands next to the window, her gaze fixed and her hands in motion, probably weaving her own tales of childhood. She is looking at a dead paper wasp, still yellow and bright with dusty broken wings, with its legs pointed inward, a gesture of pleading hands. Did it really beg for mercy at that final moment? Foolish creature, I thought to myself. The silence of my thoughts broke as she left, running to her mother's call. She left something behind, next to that dead wasp—something round and white. I looked at it for a while and then picked it up slowly. The fragility of childhood is to be preserved. The moistness of its soft body made me aware of its nature—a small, round piece of flour that she might have stolen from the kitchen. I stared at it and then kept it back in its original place, next to the dead wasp.

It remained there at the same place for days, until I picked it up. It was hard, with no trace of moisture left on it. Its hard body reminded me of something—a needle that punctured the soft skin of my subconscious past, taking me back to the days of my innocence and childhood. A distorted fragment appeared before me, where I could see an open-mouthed earthen *chullah*, a large-
*tarami*¹ with flour dough spread wide, and

¹ a large plate



a feeble old figure of my grandmother. I could see Nani in fragments, kneading that dough with her weak, protruding knuckles, fingers, and palm forming a fist. She then takes a small piece of flour, makes it round, and places it next to that *chullah* to make it a bit solid. She is making *makk ki rotis*, shifting from one hand to the other. I see her face clearly now and her pale hands, which, at times, she dips in water to make those *rotis* less sticky. See how bravely she places the *roti* on that hot *tawha*, putting the first half-baked one inside the *chullah*.

I could see myself sitting next to her on that low, flat *bindaa*², about three to four inches above the floor. I am waiting for her to pick up that small ball of dough that she just picked from *tarami*, and move it around my head in a clockwise manner, a complete and perfect circle. I never counted it, though, but surely it was around five to six complete circles that she often draws, murmuring something in a very unclear manner. Sometimes her lips would open wide apart, and sometimes she would mumble with her lips glued together. Then she would put that flour ball in the *chullah* with a *chimta*. Its white flesh burning, flames all around it, and now it has turned yellow in colour.

The mask has fallen. Nani is getting old, and it seems to me like the end of a beautiful summer, embracing autumn bravely with an ignorance of winter. The skin has started folding around her face, the hands are getting feeble and pale yellow, and maybe those bangles are getting in with more ease with each passing day. The memory here suddenly takes a leap.

It is probably one of those autumn mornings when she calls me in her feeble yet shrill voice. Sitting next to the *chullah*, she is almost done with the *rotis* and tells me to sit down. She takes that small flour

ball and completes five to six circles in a clockwise manner around my head, murmuring something a bit clearer this time. To satisfy my curiosity, I ask, "Nani, why do you do this? What does this small ball have to do with me and my head?"



²stool

She smiles at me and replies, “Son, this small ball of flour protects you from an evil eye. I put this thing in this burning *chullah*. If it bursts and makes a sound, you had *nazar*; but now it is destroyed with that ball, and if it doesn’t burst, then you never had *nazar*.” “Baa, but what exactly is this *nazar*? How does it come to me? And why does it have to come to me only? Why not my father or mother, or anyone else in the home?” She laughs. It was probably the first time that I had noticed her laughing so hard. “No, son, everyone gets affected by this evil eye. But this affects mostly small children. They say it has the power to tear a stone, like soft paper.”

She then picks up that small ball, holds my face straight with her hands, and starts making those clockwise circles around my head. She is mumbling a Pahari folk song:

“Rayar khayar nazra naal,

Chukan aangan gwandan, aaya gya.

Hindu Muslim Sikh Isaayi,

Masi, Phuphi, Nani Dadi.

Ron ton chukha, teh hasi khedi laga,

*Teh nazraan laan waaliyan ni, naazran
phutan.”*

She is about to put that ball of flour in fire when our attention shifts to an explosion in the middle of the air. She keeps that flour ball aside on the *chatti*³. I see someone, a manly figure, running down towards us and shouting, “Cross-border shelling has

erupted again over a dispute over a drowned body that was found near the border. “Come with me, we need to get into the bunker immediately.” I recognise my father. I can’t hear what exactly he is saying, there are sounds of explosions everywhere at intervals. The *chota* gun fire... trr...trr can be heard in between.

“Take him with you immediately; I will bring these rotis with me, in case we have to stay there for long.” Father nods as if he understands everything, picks me up in his arms, and runs towards the bunker near the *Bandi*⁴. The moment we enter, we hear an explosion that seems not very far away, and I can still sense my ears ringing. I hear cries and wailings all around; these cries seem familiar and personal this time. I see a glimpse of horror in my father’s eyes. He leaves me there and runs outside, his feet beating against the floor noisily. I run beside him; there is smoke all around, cries in familiar voices that I hear on a daily basis. A mortar falls on the kitchen where I was sitting with Baa a while back. I see myself walking in the direction of the kitchen, where it once was, but now it exists merely as a cloud of black smoke. I reach near it, bend down, and pick up a round ball. It is no longer pale, it has stains of red and a bit of black in the background.

Why didn’t she tell me anything about it turning red? I thought. Is it about *nazar* being too strong? My hands start shaking, and I throw that ball again in the smoke, where once it was Baa’s *chullah*. I heard an explosion. I didn’t know whether it was the *nazar* or the gun that made a bursting sound. Baa was right, I thought. But now, she belongs to Tohi too.

³shelf

⁴cattle shed

ROTTEN MANGOES

Antara Kashyap

It was the year my grandmother broke her hand trying to drive out a snake that had slithered into our kitchen. I remember it clearly, despite the gaping holes in my memory, because I was mopping the courtyard at that moment, trying to get rid of the mud the flood had left behind. It was something that happened to us annually, partly because our house was the nearest to the pond and partly because it was positioned at a level lower than the rest of the houses on the hill. *Aita*¹ used to say that our house, just like our state, was shaped like a bowl. So it was inevitable for water to flow in from all sides and flood us. It was our destiny, she often said.

When she fell, there was a soft thud, so I didn't make anything of it. It was when she got up and chased the snake away that I found out that she had fallen. She cooked lunch for us with an arm we didn't know was broken, and only later in the evening did it begin to swell. Back then, I never realized the pain she must have been in, for she never let it show. Back then, all I could ever think about was escaping to a big city, where snakes never slithered into kitchens, water never rushed into homes, and scary grandfathers never existed.

When she came back from the clinic with her right hand in a sling, the first thing *Koka*² asked her was who would make dinner for him. That was the first time my ten-year-old body felt murderous rage. I still remember it—the overwhelming heat that took over me for a few seconds. And I still remember the shame right after, when I realized that I was too afraid to act on it.

¹ grandmother

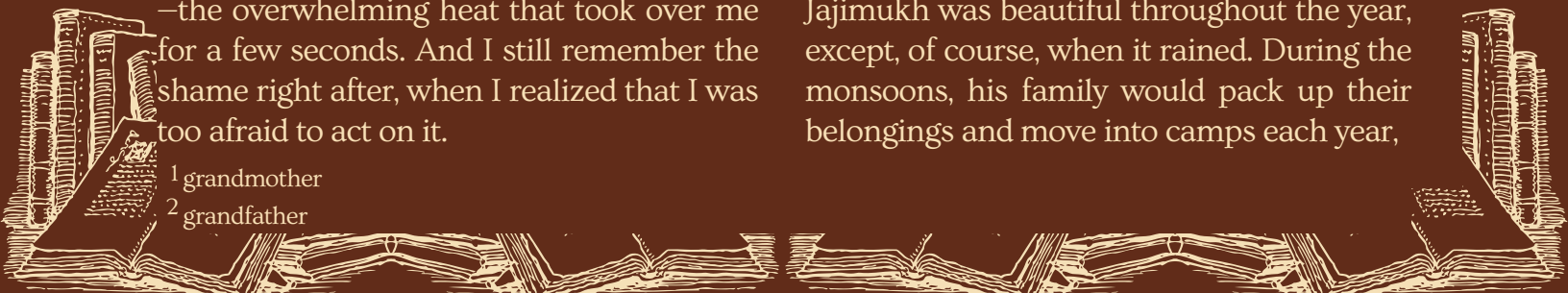
² grandfather

That night, *Aita* cried herself to sleep beside me, while *Koka* screamed at her for being careless from the other bed. I remember praying for my grandfather to die in his sleep so that she could finally be happy and free. The next day, my grandfather called his brother and asked him to send somebody to help us out. And that is how Madhab came to live with us.

Madhab must have been around fourteen then, he did not know his exact age because they rarely kept a record of births in his village. He lived with my grandfather's relatives in Guwahati to support his family. He never learned how to read or write, and by the time I last saw him, he could barely write his first name. Madhab would stay with us for only a summer when I was ten, but in so many ways, it would change my life forever.

I hated him at first. I thought he was filthy and rude, especially to *Aita*. He would make the same mistakes and drive *Koka* crazy, and she would bear the brunt of it. For the first couple of weeks, my grandparents considered sending him back, but there was nothing we could do. I was too young to bear the brunt of the entire household. And *Koka* was too proud to help us out.

So Madhab stayed and eventually ended up growing on us. He stopped making fun of me, and I started talking to him. He spoke a lot about his village, the one he had to leave behind to send his siblings to school. Jajimukh was beautiful throughout the year, except, of course, when it rained. During the monsoons, his family would pack up their belongings and move into camps each year,



in anticipation and by default, and come back three months later to rebuild what was left of their home.

Madhab used to tell me that, despite all of it, he was happy. Even when the walls had caved in and even when they had no food because the crops were destroyed, he had the most peaceful sleep on the floor of their home. That was until his father, in a drunken stupor, threw himself into the river.

Looking back, I realize just how young the age of fourteen was to have to carry the weight of the entire world on his little back. But at ten, I saw someone so much older and stronger. Someone who could protect me—something I never really had.

In a way, Madhab was the only one I ever really talked to. When he asked me why I didn't live with my parents, I did not have a good enough answer for him. We did not understand why things were the way they were, but we both knew what it was like to be displaced. Of course, I missed my parents, I told him. But I could not leave *Aita* alone. I was the only one she had, and I was going to protect her. Madhab saw through my excuses but never told me how weak I was.

It had been two months since *Aita* broke her hand, and Madhab came to live with us. By now, he knew everything about me. We would sit in our courtyard while my grandparents slept and talk about my dreams. He would pick fruits for me from the trees that grew in our yard, and I would hold his hand while we ate them together. Those two hours of the day were entirely ours. I taught him how to write the Assamese alphabet, and he would read my textbook out loud. That was the only semblance of stability in my ten-year-old



life, and I wanted it to continue forever. A life where it would just be me, my *Aita*, and Madhab. And we would be so happy.

It was a warm afternoon when I returned from school, excited for our lesson. We were sitting in our usual spot, with my textbook in my lap. Madhab had just cut a mango that he had picked. As usual, he had kept thin slices for himself and the seed for me. The pulp gave away as I bit into it and ran down my chin, juice dripping through my fingers. Madhab reached out to wipe my face, laughing at my clumsiness. I still remember how his hand felt against my mouth—soft and warm. I wanted to feel that warmth, to hold him close to me, and to stay like that forever. I do not know where I got the courage from, but I held his face with my sticky hands and pulled it close to mine. My first kiss felt like fire and smelled like mangoes.

Even today, when somebody asks me about him, I tell them I don't remember. It is partially true; what happened after that comes back to me in disjointed flashes. A scream, a cane that descended on us. Black and blue bruises on his face and a lip that bled. *Aita's* sobs as *Koka* dragged me by my wrists and locked me in the storeroom. Madhab's voice was across the door, begging for me to be let out. When I think about that day, I see it unfolding in flashes, like a movie you watched all those years ago. It's like it didn't happen to me at all.

But it did happen to me. No, I caused all the terrible things that happened that night and in my life after that. Maybe if I had just stayed in that room instead of jumping out of the window that night, would things be different today? If I had just let things happen to me passively, would I be free of

that guilt I've carried around with me my entire life?

That night, when I jumped out of that window, I actively set in motion a chain of events that would leave so many lives destroyed. But I couldn't have known it then, could I? When I woke him up in the middle of the night and asked him to run away with me, Madhab begged me to go back inside. We would apologize to them properly in the morning, and everything would be fine, he said. I should have listened to him, but instead, blindsided by rage and shame, I ran out into the dark.

Like he always did, he followed me. And when I jumped into the pond, he jumped too. The next morning, when they found his body caught underneath the water hyacinth, he had already begun to bloat.

My grandparents sent me back to my parents after Madhab's death, who then sent me to a boarding school. After *Koka* died of a cardiac arrest three years later, my grandmother became a shell of herself. She was never happy, nor was she free.

I got that escape I always dreamed of. I live in a very small apartment in a big city. No snakes slither in through the window, nor does anybody yell at me anymore. But sometimes, because it is an old building, when it rains heavily, water seeps in through a broken window pane and floods my home.

I still dream about him from time to time. In my dreams, he's always smiling. We're always in that courtyard, eating mangoes, with my textbook on my lap and my hand in his. The beautiful child of fourteen that I killed.

WHAT IS HIS *PH-ATHER'S* NAME?

Vinay Rajoria

Of course, the problem of my identity began to trouble my mother when I had to be admitted to a school. Before that, I was everything that my aunts, uncles, grandparents, friends, enemies, the *chai-wallah* and the grocery *storewallah* called me. I was their babu, beta, baby, boy, bhanja, bhatija, and bachha. However, the school, like the government, cannot tolerate this pet-naming business. They want a proper, A-1-quality name document. Above all, they want your father's name. You see, it is here that the problem in my story began.

I learned very early in my life that a person needs both a mother and a father to be born—to come out of the screaming doors of the maternity ward into the screaming lanes of this world. After coming out of that ward, pretty much every door in the world is opened for you by the magical key of your father's name. This story narrates how I learned this lesson the hard way.

Picture this—the minuscule and understaffed administrative office of one of Delhi's best public schools, where a peon, wearing with great pride a well-pressed, gray safari suit, is exuding confidence, chewing *guthka*, and seeking pleasure from the thought of being the controller of the destiny of the hundreds of children of the most well-off of Delhi's middle class. On any normal day, these newly rich people would not have afforded this safari suit *servant* with a single nod of their heads, but that day they were ready to prostrate before him because he possessed, at the nib of his pen, the power over—what middle-class parents fear the most—the career of their children. With that arrogant pen, he was

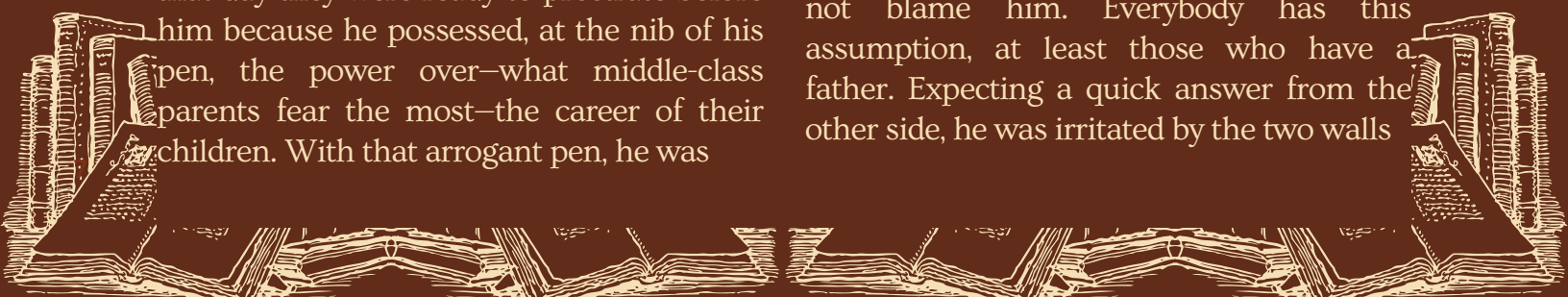
filling out forms, an arrogance that comes naturally with the power of controlling the *kismet* of people.

His name was Mr. Kismet Kumar. But why was he doing it himself? Exasperated from watching the parents fill out the forms incorrectly, Mr. Kismet Kumar took their destinies into his own hands and started to fill out the forms on his own. He scolded them, with an anger that was also new and pleasurable to him, to stand in a neat, single line and prostrate before him one by one.

When our turn came, after some ten parents had already garlanded Lord Kismet, he pulled out my form and started filling it out to decide my *kismet*. After ticking off all the mundane questions without even looking up and with an unthinking quickness that only made his boring job fast and bearable, he stopped and scanned us, but only when it came to my father's name.

He spoke in an English that overly stressed the '*-is*' making it '*-ijj*' and turned the '*ph-*' of my father into the Hindi '*f-*' making it sound "*ph-ather*". This added more ambiguity to this word than it already had in my young mind. And with it, he asked that one question that still fills me with dread, but more than that, with emptiness.

"*What ijij hijj ph-ather's name?*" He asked with a nonchalance that comes with the assumption that everybody has a father. I do not blame him. Everybody has this assumption, at least those who have a father. Expecting a quick answer from the other side, he was irritated by the two walls





of silence that were standing on the other side. Thinking we were wasting his time, he shouted, “Speak up, madam. What *ijj hijj ph-ather’s* name?”

My mother, who knew this question was one day going to haunt both her and her son, collected all her mental courage, the same one that she had amassed eight years ago when she left the love of her life to come and settle with her parents in Delhi, and replied, “Wait, a second.”

Not in the habit of listening to “wait, a second” in response to a person’s father’s name, Mr. Kismet’s face showed built-up frustration; he was being held back in the pleasure he was having in doling out golden tickets to parents and seeing them prostrate. We were ruining the most eventful day of his life. He was about to say something mean, but he saw my mother pulling out a bunch of important-looking papers from

her jute bag, papers that had a legal firmness about them and which smelled of dusty, old courtrooms. So, he recoiled his stingy tongue.

The jute bag was special and important. It had all the stapled papers that made us who we were. This bag had our identities stacked and bound by cotton threads. We carried ourselves in this bag; it was the most important thing about our existence. “These are my divorce papers... I think they will work”, my mother said, placing them with a thud on his messy desk with a confident expression of a single mother in a society that treats confident, single mothers as a threat.

The insecure consciousness of society often saw women like my mother as someone too confident and open-minded, whose spirit needed to be crushed. They took on the role of God and believed that she needed to be

taught a lesson. Raising a kid without a man and getting him educated without one are two different things.

Mr. Kismet replied with a tone that showed that he was restraining himself from not judging her but also could not hide his faithful allegiance to society and the school, which was his bread and butter: "Thij ijj all right, madam... but the school does not work like thij. The country does not work like thij. We need the ph-ather."

"What do you mean?" My mother irritatedly replied, her composure instantly giving itself away, and the years of suppressed anger against my absent father rose inside her. The peon, in an antagonizing manner, having more hopes for my father than my mother, said, "The divorce papers are fine, madam, but the ph-ather can come and fill out the forms, right?" "This much he can do, eh?"

His high hopes for my father made my mother remember the hopelessness she felt towards him. Eight years ago, she remembered telling her mother, when she left everything behind in Punjab and came with her only son back to where no bride should ever come—to her parent's home—her *maika*, "No one should have any hopes from that man, mumma! What hope could be had from a person who did not even come to see his newborn in the hospital? Leaving me in that situation, there is nothing he could do, Mumma.

"There is nothing he can do." My mother replied to Mr. Kismet, bringing herself back from this flashback. "He is not in town". "He lives in Punjab, or so I think. We have not been in contact for the last 7-8 years."

Mr. Kismet, with a man's curiosity, tried hard to hide that he was interested in her

story and covered that interest up by faking a detached sympathy towards her. In an informal tone, he said, "*Chalo*, okay."

My mother almost thought that this torturous investigation was over. With normalcy creeping back into her, she thought now my son could be admitted with my name, no longer needing the name of his father. Breaking this smug illusion with the brutal stroke of a single sentence, he said, "Just write your hujjband's name in the blank. Even if he can't come, his name will work." He pronounced the word 'husband' very cautiously this time, almost skipping a beat as if it had gained a new, forbidden meaning.

"A child got to have a ph-ather's name, after all, you see." He added it as a side remark to gain a few sympathetic nods and glances from the other parents who were getting impatient. My mother fell silent, but the voices in the office began chattering all at once, like a chorus of out-of-tune spirits. "To deal with a dead father would have been much easier. His death certificate would have eliminated his existence and need from the life of this poor boy." A feminine voice said, "Would have eased the admission process a lot."

In agreement with her, another voice said, "But a living and an absent father is the worst of all. He is like God. He is missing and non-existent but can still control your lives; make you realize, time and again, how powerless you are; and, therefore, how much you need him." To which Mr. Kismet replied with the finality of a philosophical voice, drawing a deep conclusion about the human condition from my story: "One cannot live without a ph-ather; even in name only, one still needs him."

"*Khair Chalo*... next parent."

12313 SEALDAH-RAJDHANI

Bipasha Bhowmick

I walk the steps to Howrah and get off at Moolchand

I span 1400 odd kilometres in fourteen broken eyelashes,

Tracks collide with screeching, steel upon steel

Perhaps peace never dwelled in parallel tracks.

I dream of lightning kalboishakhi¹

Aandhi lulls me to sleep.

Broken shy Bangla against dauntless

Google translate.

From jol khabo² to paani peena hai,

I have come a long way.

Nothing burns behind the cornea

When Raju Chaat Corner does not slip

An extra phuchka³ in genial repartee.

Productive cramming sessions have eaten

Into leisurely siestas.

My friend, static, screams at me: “Am I audible?”

14 billion pixels mock my frantic efforts at active listening!

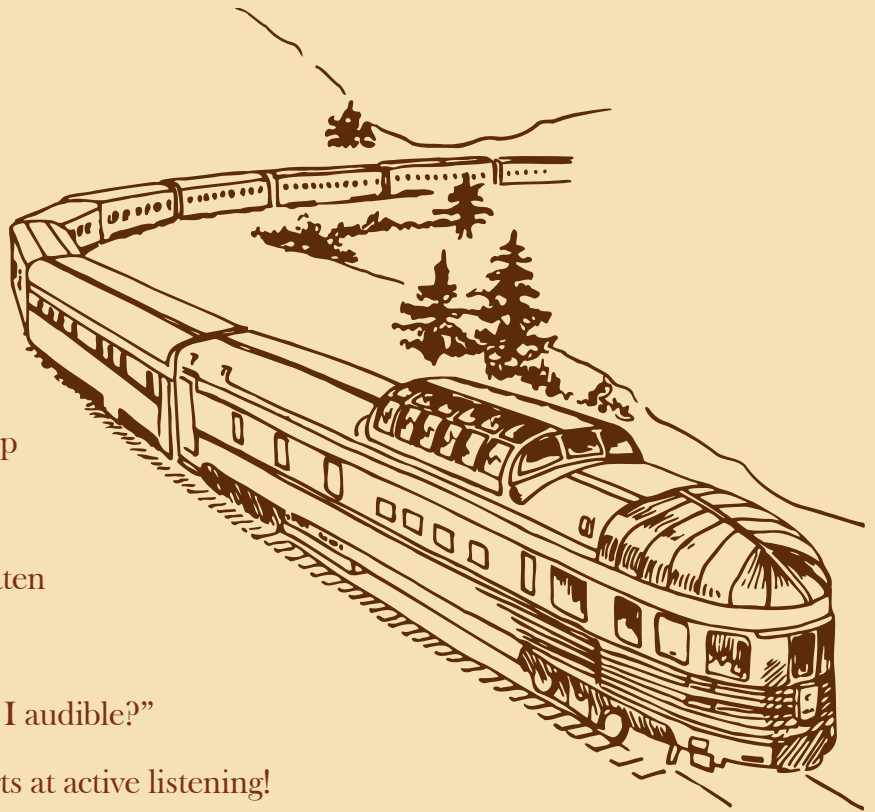
I catch glimpses of an endless paddy field

In steaming rajma chawal.

I reconcile the red plastic of the Mother Dairy Mishti Doi

With the earthy maroon of kulhad and thick rabri

Pandal hopping at C.R. Park is not half bad really—



¹ The Bangla equivalent of the North-Indian 'aandhi', a significantly rainy affair accompanied by strong winds preceded by tumid afternoons.

² The annoying Bengali habit of eating through all states of matter, directly translates to ' (I) want to eat water'

³ The Bengali name for panipuri.

WHERE IS THE LAST SKY

Abhilasha Bhattacharjee

Where are the pigeons and,
Where are the crows?
Oh, where are they?

Hopping through the grasslands
Like an army of black with beaks that frown,
Fluttering their feathers in the waters near the
sand,
Confident crows robust with their crowns.

Grey-feathered pigeons on a grassy mush,
clinging close, conscious of the merciless,
with fates as burgundy as cherries on a bush;
Vanishing nests nauseous of the wilderness.

The crows feel home,
The grey-feathered ones as if sinners
unatoned.
Both winged, both feathered;
Yet, by the laws of man, both tethered.

Stampeding through the grasses,
Dejecting the woods, the human eye
Like colonial masters of the Barak
Terrorizing two kinds of the human mind

Where are the pigeons, and
Where are the crows?
Oh, where are they?

They are in the winters
Following the eternal divide haunting.
Masters have gone, and
slaves' freedom granted.

And yet, in the heart it lies
Sometimes peeping outside,
To remind the crows and warn the pigeons
On whose motherland they reside.

Dejected from the bridge of Howrah,
Rejected from the shore of Brahmaputra.
Death, decay, destitution; dissolved?
For one it ends, for one begins
And thus, the pigeon laments.



if only you knew what happens when genocide ends

Sania Parween

tattered clothes, broken homes, and shattered hearts.
you ask who can peel an orange for you,
and a child starves to death in Rafah
a stomach so empty in a lifeless land
i climb four stairs and the fifth gives me cramps
a man is dead under the rubble somewhere
his daughters crying and their mother shifting in prayers.
if only you knew what ends when a genocide ends.

tattered hope, broken arms, and shattered souls.
i iron my clothes, i fold them in layers,
and a woman takes pills to stop her periods
a protestor is dragged, might be beaten until bleeds
for asking the powers when Palestine will be free
if only you knew what ends when a genocide ends.

tattered clothes, broken homes and shattered hearts.
a graveyard loses space with mothers burying sons
another son who hasn't learned life is left to none
a hand lifts for no ceasefire to cries and bombs,
bombs are louder but hunger clamours more
as probity lies under the skin and the skin covered in stones
as blue left the sky and the birds in search of homes.
if only you knew what ends when a genocide ends.



ORPHEUS

Sadaf Suleman

Doomed to love, doomed to lose

The grief that ties me straight to you

Mortal love, a quicksand

What do they know of devotion?

Our fate isn't your death my dearest

It's our love

What do they know of longing?

Apollo birthed poems for the way you look at me

For all those fawning for my voice have never heard
you sing

For spring blooms when you hum in your sleep

One glance at your face, the heavens at shame

As if my creation created to be seen by you

My darling Eurydice, I would always look back at
you.

What do they know of misfortune?

The snake never knew of you

The ripest fruits, the sweetest sirens
shallow hopes in the hearts of empty men,

You're the last essence of Aphrodite

What do they know of scheming?

Was it the Aristaeus

or Hades the cause of our ruin?

Is it the boundless ecstasy caused by you?

My heart, a temple made in your name.

What do they know of sin?

I've denied heaven for the touch of your lips on
my skin

What do they know of forgiveness?

My lover needs no pomegranates

I'd lose my sight, taste, and touch just for you to
enshrine me.

In this age of deception and meaningless cravings

My only crime was needing you more than music.

These shattered trees cautious before uttering a
word for whom they claim to adore

Know not of your faith in my lyre.

Every breath in your absence is my eulogy

There's no need to oscillate

No need for discussions or debates

If they ask whose voice urged Orpheus to turn
around

Tell them it was the flicker of your eyes

My darling Eurydice, I would always look back at
you.



WE ARE ANYTHING BUT BARREN

Reda Aamna

We are anything but barren.
 Those tiny mounds of gold that blow,
 With the parched winds being their foe,
 Bless the lands far beyond with our fortune.
 The salt in the air, the sand in our hair,
 With the 'dreary desert's' warmth on our face,
 We glide through the desiccated vicinity.

You enjoy the rain, but we?
 We have gone far too long without it.
 Romanticise the rain and the moon
 But we will present to you the immortalised,
 The brightest star, the fuel in your cars,
 The salt in your food, the pearls around your neck.
 So tell me again, are we barren?

We sit on the rocks right at the shores,
 Where the water, clear as crystal, reflects
 The shades of orange and pink.
 The 'dhows', the nets, something you would never
 know.

We have been ignored so long
 Rebellion now the epicenter of our
 sandstorms
 Declare wars yet again, for the things
 You desire, yet dare not canonise,
 We are anything but barren.

With thick skin like cacti around us,
 Date trees with our history engraved—
 Behind the remnants of Dilmun pottery,
 We often seem to disappear.
 Humility right beneath our thick skin,
 But like the oasis we rise.

We are small, weak, and unknown,
 Haven't seen the snow, the hail you praise.
 We may not idealise the rain like you do
 But when it rains, we know its worth.
 So tell me again, are we really barren.



*A response to Tagore's "Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way,
 Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit", from the poem 'Where the Mind is Without Fear'*

LEXICON REPORT

Antara Kashyap

The English Literary Association, Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, hosted its annual academic Fest: Lexicon 2024, on February 27th and 28th, under the theme 'Beyond Borders: Literatures of Experience.' This theme delved into the interplay of physical and metaphorical boundaries, identity, marginality, memory, and experience in literature.

Day 1 commenced with the Slam Poetry Competition, showcasing the creative talents of participants from various colleges across Delhi. The event was a testament to the vibrant literary community of students who stunned the audience with their poetry across genres and styles.

An enlightening panel discussion titled 'Partition Pages: Literary Legacies' followed, featuring esteemed panelists Sukrita Paul Kumar, Debjani Sengupta, and Gurmehar Kaur. Moderated by Debaditya Bhattacharya, the panel delved into the profound literature emerging from the Partition of India, providing valuable insights, imparted through lived experiences of the panelists. The event demonstrated the significance of memory in literature and the power of reclaiming the narrative by telling one's story.

The highlight of the day was the Inaugural Address delivered by esteemed Chief Guest, William Dalrymple. His address traced India's historical narrative from the Late-Medieval period to its Independence, captivating a full-house audience with his profound insights and eloquence. The address served as a reminder that History plays a pivotal role in shaping our identity and experiences, and walks hand-in-hand with Literature.

Concluding the day was a captivating conversation with renowned author Samit Basu, titled 'Literature Unbound: Exploring Borders in Science Fiction.' Moderated by Shreyashi Das, the discussion explored the genre of Science Fiction and its profound ability to transcend literal and metaphorical boundaries. Basu also addressed the frequently asked questions on writing as a vocation, and imparted invaluable advice to aspiring writers.





Day 1 of Lexicon 2024 was a resounding success, fostering intellectual discourse, creative expression, and a deeper appreciation for the diverse realms of literature.

Continuing the intellectual fervor of Lexicon 2024, Day 2 commenced with the highly anticipated Literary Quiz competition, drawing together the sharpest minds in a spirited display of literary prowess. A highly charged and fast-paced event, the quiz competition proved how knowledge and fun are not mutually exclusive to one another.

Following this, the Open Mic competition once again took center stage, captivating the audience with the raw talent and impassioned performances of the participating students. Showcasing their skills through various forms of expressions, the students proved that art exist all around us, in different manifestations, and that its impact is insurmountable.

The day unfolded with a captivating Talk titled 'The Making of an Academic,' featuring Professor Anisur Rahman in conversation with Dr. Shuby Abidi. Professor Rahman shared profound insights into his journey as an academic, author, and translator, imparting invaluable lessons on navigating both the scholarly and human aspects of life. Tracing back to his highly venerated career, Professor Rahman stressed the importance of being a good human being before an academic.

The culminating event of the day was the poignant Valedictory Address delivered by Professor Amitabha Bagchi. His eloquent speech reflected on his illustrious career and life as a writer, leaving a lasting impression on the audience. Professor Bagchi's address, delivered through a series of anecdotes and learnings, showed how multifaceted the Literatures of Experience can be.

Subsequently, the ceremony transitioned into the prize distribution segment, recognizing the outstanding achievements of participants in both offline (Slam Poetry, Quiz, Open Mic) and online competitions (Flash Fiction, Essay Writing, Film to Comic, Photography, Book Jacket Designing, and Meme Making). The events were judged by the members of the esteemed faculty of the Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia. The breadth of talent showcased during Lexicon 2024 underscored the event's roaring success.

The success of Lexicon 2024 is attributed to the unwavering dedication of the English Literary Department, led by the Head of the Department, Dr. Simi Malhotra, and our ELA Advisor, Dr. Shuby Abidi, along with the diligent volunteers from the English Department, whose tireless efforts ensured the event's memorable execution.

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We thank our *Head of Department Prof. Simi Malhotra* and *ELA Advisor Dr. Shuby Abidi* for their guidance and unwavering support throughout the compilation of this Magazine

“The 5th issue of our ELA Magazine fills me with immense pride and admiration for the creative spirit that thrives in our department. This edition beautifully captures an intersection of voices of our students. They meet each other across these pages as singular voices and yet embark on a collective journey to make sense of the world, in and through their writings. I congratulate all the contributors to this edition and, most especially, the editors for crafting such a remarkable literary collection. Congratulations. All my love and admiration.”

- Prof. Simi Malhotra, HoD

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